Is this design?:
Poetry and prose in the broadsides of the John Lewis Collection

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Abstract

19th century broadsides have been discussed in the history of design as examples of a typographic shift, brought about by the emergence of display styles such as "fat faces", and associated with new technologies such as the iron press. These characteristics can be seen mainly on broadsides that functioned as advertisement. Other kinds of 19th century broadsides were intended for popular reading, telling news and tales. These commonly combined poetry and prose, unlike earlier broadsides, typically written in either one of these text genres. This essay asks whether this combination was specific to broadsides and if it was limited to a specific country. Broadsides of John Lewis Printing Collection of the University of Reading Special Collections were analysed and compared to those of the Library of Congress, and similar examples were found in different countries. This indicates that the combination of poetry and prose in those broadsides goes beyond the framework of national borders.

Keywords

Broadside, design, poetry, prose, national identity, newspaper, typography

Broadsides in design history

Broadsides are generally defined as one-page publications printed only on one side, unfolded and with no specific standardized format. They were among the first works issued from Gutenberg's press and became popular throughout the following centuries, perhaps due to their relative cheapness and versatility. Displayed on public walls or read privately, distributed for free or sold, broadsides conveyed texts as diverse as government proclamations, ghost stories, timetables and songs, and were eventually collected, assembled as books or discarded. Still, some general tendencies and shifts in broadside readership can be inferred from indicators such as sales figures and average circulation.

Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, broadside ballads – which speak about fictional and non-fictional stories, in verses meant to be sung or read – had more circulation than any other publishing genre in Britain (Nebeker 2007). In the 19th century they were less sought-after, while broadsides with news written in prose, or combining prose and poetry, were selling over 500,000 copies (Hepburn 2000, p.74). Despite the ubiquity of broadsides, their inclusion in design history may seem anachronistic.

As Walker (1989, p.29) remarks, design historians tend to define design as a "specialist activity associated with the industrial revolution" and mass production. But broadsides predate the industrial revolution, were frequently printed on old wood presses, and their large print run derived more from intensive human labour than from new technologies of mass production. Also, if in the industrial process of production, design gradually became "a process of conceiving rather than realizing the form" (Dilnot 1984, p.19), this separation between designing and making was not generally established in the production of broadsides, even in the 19th century. The editions issued by broadside maker James state "Printed by J. Catnach", although he was perhaps a combination of storyteller, businessman, printer and mass communicator. Anyway, Catnach's credit means that he did not consider himself a designer.

On the other hand, 19th century broadsides that function as advertisements have been identified with the rise of industrialization. Hence the references to advertising broadsides in design history, which distinctly exhibit display letterforms, such as woodtype letters or Thorne's typefaces – and the relative omission of other

Fig. 1: The life and sufferings of Jane Wade, a young lady of pleasure and fashion. James Catnach. c. 1825. Size: 23 x 36 cm. Source: University of Reading Special Collections

broadsides that were everyday popular reading. Yet by prioritizing published and printed material that seem to represent industrialization (or the taste of an elite), design history can unwittingly distance itself from the actualities of reading. In this historical narrative, the selection of what was published can become detached from the creation and reception of what was read, which ultimately disconnects production from use.

As design historians shift towards analyses less centred on the industrial revolution and industrialized regions, the inclusion of broadsides other than advertisements becomes less anachronistic. An example of this shift is World history of design (Margolin 2015), which discusses the broadside production of the printing establishment of Jose Vanegas Arroyo in Mexico. Broadsides of different centuries and purposes are also thoroughly included in ephemera studies, dedicated to the everyday printed material.

The popularity of some 19th century broadsides suggests that their graphic presentation resonated with the reading culture of the time. Was this culture geographically widespread? To what extent was it also manifest in popular publications other than broadsides, such as newspapers and magazines? Published artefacts and readership are reciprocally dependent. Still, this interdependence tends to be overlooked by historical narratives about the graphic presentation of publications – with the exception of studies focused on the uses and receptions correlated with design, which observe "not only what design does to people, but what people do with design" (Walker 1989, p.183).

The broadsides of the John Lewis printing collection

This study is focused on a branch of the ephemera collection of British designer and historian John Lewis (1912-1996). Dilnot (1984, p.9) thinks Lewis is among those for which history is in the service of a practical purpose and, indeed, Lewis (1962, p.9) referred to his own collection as a "designer's scrapbook". As an author of books about ephemera, typography and design, he also used his archive as research material for his texts. The approximately 20,800 pieces of graphic communication that he collected were transferred to the University of Reading Special Collections after his death.

Printed ephemera comprises the majority of Lewis' archive. From the group of broadsides, 14 were issued in the 19th century and the oldest item is dated 1650. Eight of the 19th century broadsides, all printed in London, combine poetry and prose. This might reflect Lewis' preferences, or the availability of these articles for collectors. Broadsides of the John Lewis Collection issued before the 19th century did not mix poetry with prose, whereas this combination can be found in other 19th century publications, such as chapbooks and religious tracts. Therefore, this arrangement was probably typical of the 19th century, irrespective of Lewis' specific interests. Since broadsides circulated among different social classes (Hepburn, 2000, p.59-75), reading prose alongside verse was a relatively frequent practice at the time.

Example of combination of poetry and prose

The presence of poetry alongside prose in broadsides resulted in simultaneous narratives, which the reader could identify and understand. Apparently the writer, who could equally describe one story or make verses about it, often chose both options. News was accompanied by songs. A fiction story could be told twice, one version being a narrative prose and another version being a poem. Type, columns, ornaments and strokes would help the reader browse through these different stories on the page.

Also, one topic could be considered from various angles. This is exemplified in the broadside Jane Wade, a young lady of pleasure and fashion, published by James Catnach and one of the items of the John Lewis Collection [figure 1]. The story is broken into four pieces of individual texts, each one telling one aspect of Wade's life. The first one, written in first person and verses, is her own version of her life; the second one is Wade's

life written in impersonal narration; the third one is her letter to her parents and the fourth one is a poem that Wade prepared for the public to read at her funeral. On the top of the page, two sentences summarize Wade's life.

The division of the content is stressed by the layout. Bold titles and capital letters signal the beginning of each text. Different column widths and alignments – justified or left-aligned – distinguish the songs and verses from the rest. Hence one story is fragmented as a set of points of view and text genres. Rather than making written transitions between the points of view in continuous texts, the edition maintains them as non-continuous and autonomous units.

The different texts are separated by white areas, ornaments and images. In addition, the relatively descriptive content of the impersonal narrative and the letter is visually grouped in larger justified columns of the same width. The subjective feelings arising from the story and expressed in verses are set in short and left-aligned columns. The reader is thus able to scan the page and select any one of the different texts, which can be read individually.
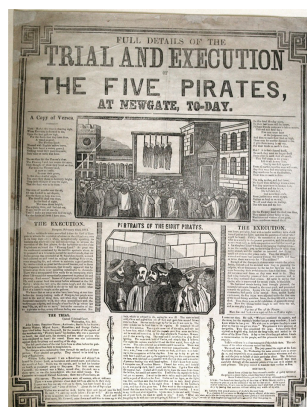

Fig. 2: Full details of the trial and execution of the five pirates, at Newgate, today. n.p. 1861. Size: 37 x 50cm. Source: University of Reading Special Collections
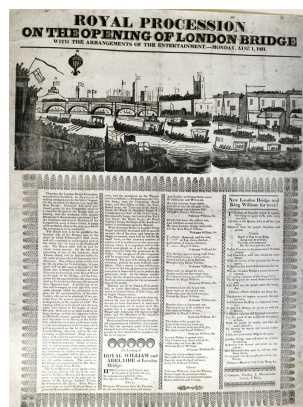
Fig. 3: Royal procession on the opening of London Bridge. James Catnach.1831. Size: 38 x 50 cm. Source: University of Reading Special Collection
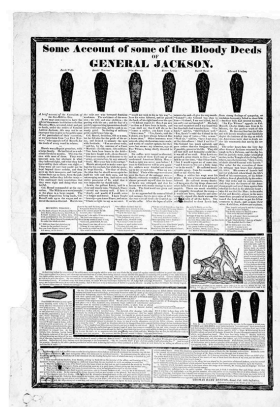
Fig. 4: Some account of some of the bloody deeds of General Jackson. John Binns. 1828. Size: 55.7 x 38.5 cm. Source: Library of Congress
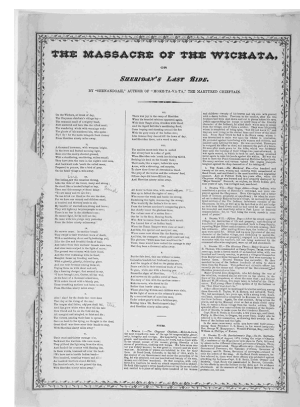
Fig. 5: The massacre of the Wichata. n.p.n.d. Size: 42.5 x 29 cm. Source: Library of Congress

19th century broadsides and reading strategies

Broadside-makers created a multitude of arrangements in pages with poetry and prose [fig. 2-5]. The proportion of each one of the text forms varied, as well as their position on the page. The broadside theme could be more or less subdivided in different texts, thereby leading to different degrees of fragmentation. What these broadsides have in common is the non-continuous reading that they generate.

The presence of verses and prose on the same page almost inevitably results in dissimilar text-columns, and justified and left-aligned columns tended to be used for prose and poetry respectively. Additionally, different column widths often emphasized and made clear the difference of text genre, being used especially in the more fragmented broadsides. The contrasting text-columns conveyed different meanings, guiding a non-continuous reading and stressing the divisions of the page that the mix of text genres already tends to cause.

The inclusion of poetry among news and political texts that occurred in 19th century broadsides gradually disappeared [figure 6]. And if some 19th century newspapers had space for verses among news (and perhaps sometimes as news), they ultimately removed this text genre, except in specific contexts such as literary supplements. Even so, the non-linear edition associated with that inclusion of poetry in broadsides continued to exist. While the verses themselves were removed, the contrasting text-columns that they produced were preserved.

Pages with non-continuous texts certainly predate the 19th century and existed in publishing genres other than the broadside – the footnote that goes parallel to a main text is one example. What characterizes these broadsides, apparently distinguishing them from these other examples, is the intentional breaking of one subject into small texts units that can be read individually but also form a whole on a page, and which can be perceived through the column structure.

Comparison of broadsides and periodicals

The fragmentation of the Jane Wade broadside previously mentioned contrasts with the edition of the 19th century periodical The penny magazine [figure 7-8]. Written in continuous prose text, and set in the same typeface and size as the title, The penny magazine looks homogeneous compared to Jane Wade. This uniformity is visually emphasized by two symmetrical justified columns. The content of The penny magazine is divided in parts that apparently try to resemble chapters of a book rather than a fragmented broadside.

Other periodicals occasionally published verses, often on the front page [figure 9]. However, newspapers were chiefly filled with information written in prose, organized as separate articles that discuss different and sometimes unrelated topics [figure 9]. A page of a 19th century newspaper has a significantly larger amount of text than a broadside, and gives the impression of requiring more focus and time from the reader. Yet the presence of verses in this kind of page indicates that they were part of the daily reading material at the time.

Even though 19th century broadsides were a versatile medium which could potentially include any content, it seems that the broadsides that combined poetry and prose tended to present some specific topics. Celebrations, tragedies and crimes, deaths and executions were often chronicled in these broadsides [figure 2-5]. Fiction and non-fiction could sometimes be mixed, contrasting with the more ostensibly objective aspect of 19th century newspapers and The penny magazine. This means that broadsides differed from the periodicals of the time not only in graphic presentation, but also in content.

Fig. 6: Broadside about the presidential election. n.p. 1864. Size: 30 x 32 cm. Source: Library of Congress
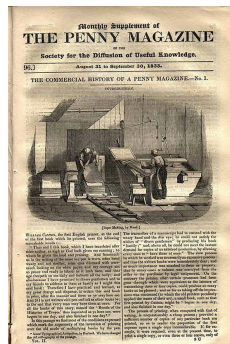
Fig. 7: The penny magazine (cover of a monthly supplement). Published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.1833. Size: 18.7 x 283 cm. Source: University of Minnesota
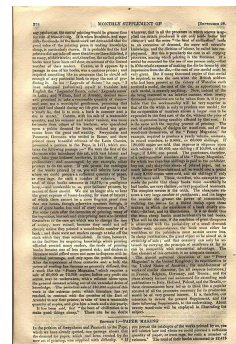
Fig 8: The penny magazine (inside page of a monthly supplement). Published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.1833. Size: 18.7 x 28.3 cm. Source: University of Minnesota

Fig. 9: The Jeffersonian. 1853. Source: Library of Congress

Broadsides of the library of congress

It is unclear if John Lewis intentionally collected only 19th century broadsides that were printed in London. Perhaps he selected what looked interesting or what was available, regardless of the issuing location. The large print run of some broadsides issued in the Seven Dials area of London, where the printing workshops of James Catnach, John Pitts and Birt were established, probably increased the chances of finding a remaining copy of them in the 20th century. The significant presence of broadsides issued by Catnach, Pitts and Birt's in the Lewis' collection may result from this large circulation.

An examination of the material in Lewis' archive may indicate that the combination of poetry and prose in 19th century broadsides was specific to London, and perhaps especially Seven Dials. In order to test this hypothesis, the material of the John Lewis Collection was compared to the 19th century broadsides of the Library of Congress. 32 broadsides with poetry and prose were found, 1 being from Mexico and the rest from the United States, and broadsheets from both countries also provided similar examples. Therefore, combining poetry and prose was not a practice limited to London or British broadside printers [figure 10-11].

Clearly, the collection of broadsides in the Library of Congress was based on criteria other than those of the John Lewis collection. The predominance of broadsides that document historical and social facts indicates that they were selected more due to their written content, than for their visual or physical qualities. Some of the common topics are elections, the civil war and the abolition of slavery, as well as stories linked to the local life and

culture – for example, the burning of a nearby theatre, or a crime. Topics representative of the national interests surface in these publications, such as the emancipation proclamation of Lincoln in an American broadside [figure 10-11]. However, the texts could also inform the local reader about distant places. This is indicated by a French broadside, from the library of the University of San Diego, that tells of the abundance of gold in California. Interestingly, the last verses say that on est heureux aussi en sa patrie (one is happy also in one's own homeland) [figure 12] and California is referred to as a pays (country) – which reminds us that the present-day national borders and prevalent definition of country may differ from those of the 19th century.

The percentage of broadsides with poetry and prose in the Library of Congress is minimal compared to those at the John Lewis Collection. They consist of nearly 0,5% of the total 19th century broadsides of the online database, whereas they represent roughly 57% of the Lewis' collection. This can either reflect the criteria of each collection for selecting material, or reflect the abundant production of this kind of broadside in London, or perhaps it is a combination of both factors. In any case, the combination of text genres was practiced by 19th century broadside makers of different places and languages.

Poetry and prose in broadsides of different languages and places

It is possible that the graphic presentation of a 19th century broadside is identified with the images, techniques, type, colors, papers and the overall culture of the place where it was issued. What is more, in some cases they became source of inspiration for publishers and artists of later generations, thereby contributing to the formation of a national tradition. This is the case of Mexican broadsides issued by Antonio Vanegas Arroyo in the late 19th century, whose illustrators Manuel Manilla [fig. 13] and Jose Guadalupe Posada [fig. 10]influenced 20th century publications such as the newspaper El Machete, edited by artists Diego Rivera and David Siqueros, and the book production of designer Díaz de León (Margolin 2015, V.1, p. 490; V. 2 p. 484). Still, the specific presence of poetry and prose in 19th century broadsides transcended national borders.

It seems unlikely that this practice started in one place and then influenced printers from abroad. This would imply that the broadsides from one region were printed before the other ones. Instead, both American and British broadsides date from the 1810s onwards. At Seven Dials, their production seems to have hit its peak in the 1820-1830s, and at the Library of Congress the date of the broadsides tends to coincide with significant events of American history. This suggests that the combination of text genres did not have one specific origin or cause, but was instead connected with factors pertaining to different Western countries, cultures and languages.

Fig. 10: Inmemorables recuerdos de la plaza de toros en Mixcoac, inauguración verificada el Domingo, 20 de Mayo de 1894 (Immemorial recollections of Mixcoac's bullfighting plaza, inauguration verified Sunday, May 20, 1894). Antonio Vanegas Arroyo. Artist: José Guadalupe Posada. 1894. Size: 40.2 x 29 cm. Source: Library of Congress

Fig. 11: Emancipation proclamation of President Abraham Lincoln, freeing the slaves of the United States. A. B. Daniel, Sr.; The Enquirer Job Printing Co. 1896. Size: 50 x 90 cm. Source: Library of Congress

Fig. 12: Mines d'or de la Californie (gold mines in California). Metz & Paris: Dembour & Gangel, ca. 1850. Size: 39 x 31 cm. Source: University of San Diego
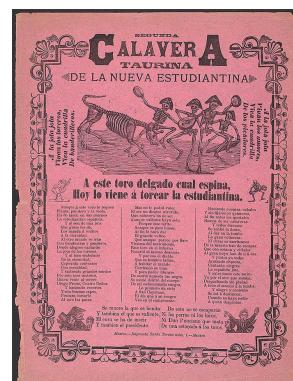
Fig. 13: Segunda calavera taurina de la nueva estudiantina. A este toro delgado cual espina, hoy lo viene a torear la estudiantina (Second bull calavera from the student music group. That skinny bull, whose spine today the student music group comes to bullfight). Antonio Vanegas Arroyo. Artist: Manuel Manilla. 1894. Size: 39.9 x 30.1 cm. Source: Library of Congress

These factors can range from the influence of printed popular songs to the influence of religious publications. Earlier

ballads commonly reproduced lyrics that were sung by the broadside seller, and this combination of musical performance, accompanied by its printed version, also existed in places other than Britain. The printed form of religious speeches was another possible influence, as the speeches often interlaid prose discourse and orations [figure 14-15]. Also, literary stories that were themselves mixing text genres perhaps impacted on the broadsides. Exchanges between the form of the newspaper and the broadside were facilitated by the concurrent printing of broadsides and newspapers in printing workshops, such as that of Antonio Vanegas Arroyo in Mexico. In other words, this mix can be linked to traditions and practices whose presence within various cultures helps explain why poetry appears alongside prose in broadsides of different languages and places.
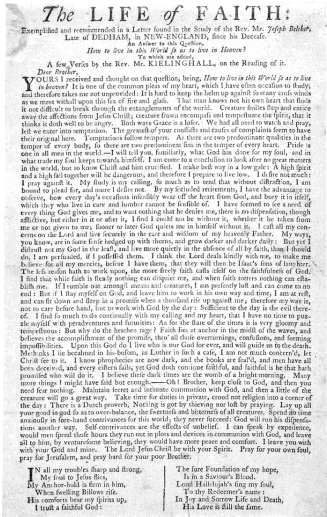

Fig. 14: The life of faith. Rev. Mr. Joseph Belcher. n.p. 1738. Size: 18 x 29 cm. Source: Library of Congress

19th century broadsides in the framework of national histories

Broadsides with poetry and prose coincided with the rise of the news industry and possibly merged new and old forms of narrative. This does not mean, however, that they exclusively represent a transition. Some of these broadsides break one theme in smaller texts whose different column widths help the reader distinguish the content. This structure is clearer in a newspaper of the 21st century than of the early 20th century [Figure 16-17]. This is a sign that the visual and typographic organization of the page does not necessarily evolve in a linear historical way.

The extent to which the graphic presentation of a page is subject to national causalities is uncertain. Although the language determines how a page will be read, the variety of languages does not coincide with the national borders. Ernest Gellner stresses
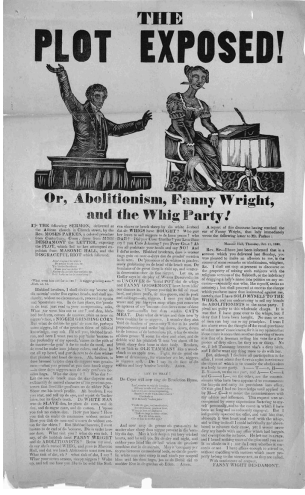

Fig. 15: The plot exposed. Sermon by Rev. Moses Parkes and letter by abolitionist Fanny Wright. 1838. Size: 48.5 x 30 cm. Source: Library of Congress

the discrepancies between national and cultural frontiers, which ultimately undermine the ideal of a uniform nation. Moreover, assuming that nations and nationalism were defined chiefly within the 19th century (Hobsbawm, 1990), the search for clear national origins in the use of poetry and prose in 19th century broadsides becomes fruitless, for national identities were being constructed.

Indeed, Anderson (1991[1983]) emphasizes the influence of the printing industry and the newspaper in the emergence of a national consciousness, which means that 19th century broadsides were among the causes, rather than effects, of national identities. Hence the paradox of considering them from a present-day national standpoint. Grounded in Anderson and Gellner's premises, Walker (1989, p. 119-121) states that although national standpoints do influence the present-day design production and are "mobilized for use as a marketing strategy", and although national identity is now a construct that design can help shape and promote, "most countries have a mixture of races, regions, languages and cultures". In other words, the idea that a nation has a homogeneous essence is untenable.
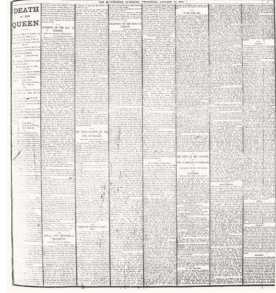

Fig. 16: Page of *The Guardian*. 1901. Source: theguardian.com

Conclusion

This study asked how the graphic presentation of 19th broadsides related to their texts and contrasted with publications from different coutries and of different genres. It was observed that broadsides with poetry and prose were produced in several western countries throughout the 19th century. The origin of this combination is unclear and may be linked to a shift in the print communication of this period. Broadsides perhaps expressed this shift (and contributed to it) by juxtaposing current forms of news texts and old popular and religious traditions. These broadsides were issued in the same period in different places and languages, thus their combination of text genres does not seem to derive from national causes.

Problems of classifying these broadsides as design artefacts arose, given that they

Fig. 17: Page of *The Guardian*. 2016

were neither incorporated in industrial processes, nor involved professionals that perceived themselves as designers. But as design history defines, criticizes and redefines its own scope and methods, its industry-oriented premises (as well as other assumptions such as elitists biases) are also questioned. One of the implications of a design history centred chiefly in industry or in the designer is that it can become oblivious to forms of using and creating, writing and reading, that can re-emerge in new objects and processes. The non-continuous reading associated with 19th century broadsides, and which constitute a significant part of the present-day print and digital communication, is an example of practices that, once invented, became effective in other contexts.

Approaching the history of design as a history of things that were produced by specific professionals in specific ways is intrinsically problematic in a society whose products and professions are in constant transformation. In addition, objects of graphic communication can be conditioned by other changing factors such as the reading culture. Conversely, these objects help transform this culture, and the new elements that they introduce can be reassessed by designers and design processes.

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